

# Forgotten cave in France was hiding Stone Age art

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Visitors tour the life-size replica of Grotte Chauvet, or Chauvet cave, in Vallon Pont d'Arc, near Bollene, southern France, March 6, 2015. Photo: AP/Claude Paris, File

PRIVAS, France — In 1994, Jean-Marie Chauvet went to investigate a stream of air blowing from a crack in the rock. He and two other explorers went to investigate.

What they found that Sunday still fills Chauvet's voice with wonder: an immense cave covered with prehistoric paintings of horses, mammoths and rhinos. The paintings were so vivid, he said, it felt like the Stone Age artists had just moments ago put down their paint and walked away.

The discovery of the long-hidden artwork created a lot of excitement, but the site was quickly closed to the public. Just by breathing, people could destroy the images.

## **Copying The Original Gallery**

Most modern humans will never get to see these early masterpieces. French scientists, artists and the government have created the next best thing. The French government spent \$60 million and took several years to make a near-exact copy of the cave about 1.2 miles away. The copy includes more than 400 paintings of horses, bears, rhinoceroses and mammoths, handprints and carvings. Experts even recreated rock formations from the original cave, as well as its cool temperatures and damp smell.

French President Francois Hollande just unveiled the site, and it opens to the public later this month.

In an interview, Chauvet described finding the paintings. He told how he and the other explorers dug through narrow tunnels guided only by a flashlight until one of them spotted "the two lines of red ochre. That's when it started." Ochre is a red-colored earth-based paint that was used by the cave artists.

"What impressed us," Chauvet said, "was the freshness."

Chauvet said: "The paintings are as if they had just left, these men, these women" who painted them.

The deeper the explorers went, the more impressive the paintings became. "It's really an art gallery," Chauvet said.

## **They Look Almost Like New**

The cave turned out to be remarkably well-preserved thanks to a rock fall about 23,000 years ago that blocked the entrance. The drawings were in such a perfect state that some researchers doubted that they were real.

"This cave wasn't exposed to gusts of violent air," Chauvet said. "It was preserved, like in a jar."

The cave paintings are now believed to be between 30,000 and 37,000 years old. At the time of their discovery, they were the oldest known cave paintings. Since then, scientists have determined that cave drawings in El Castillo, Spain, were done earlier, at least 40,000 years ago.

## **"Cave Of Forgotten Dreams"**

Chauvet fought years of court battles against the French government over rights to the discovery. He is still seeking money for pictures he took of the cave. Officials with the French Culture Ministry, where Chauvet worked, changed documents to make it look like he was on the job when he found it. If Chauvet had been working at the time, he would have no right to the money. Chauvet insists he was on vacation when he found the cave.

Today the cave is called Pont d'Arc Cavern. It is not named for its discoverers, even though most people call it Chauvet's Cave.

Pascal Terrasse is a French lawmaker in charge of the project to make the copy of the cave. He was the first government official to enter the real cave soon after it was discovered. "We understood that we had to quickly protect it, and ensure that it was never opened to the public," he said.

Experts have recorded more than 1,000 paintings from the walls of the cave. Last year, the cave was listed on the United Nations' World Heritage List of international treasures. A famous German filmmaker made a 3-D film about it called "Cave of Forgotten Dreams."

### **Artists Used Stone Age Tools**

The copy of the cave tries to look as much like the original as possible. Artists today used the same tools and methods that scientists believe the ancient artists used.

The new cave feels strange at first, a bit like an amusement park. Yet France has made copies of cave paintings before. A copy of the famous Lascaux cave paintings in France draws about 300,000 visitors yearly.

Organizers are hoping for similar crowds at the opening this month.

The next step, Terrasse said, could be a virtual, 3-D version that people could experience around the world. It would bring prehistory to generations in the future, he said.